

Western Health and Social Care Trust

Winter Preparedness Plan 23/24

Introduction

Winter is typically a challenging period for the health and social care system when demand for our services rises significantly placing increased pressure on our hospitals and on our community services. In order to protect our services, we prepare an annual winter plan setting out our arrangements to manage the predicted increase in demand for our services, particularly within our Emergency Departments.

As has been in the case in recent years, given the continuing and sustained pressure being experienced across all our services, we expect to face significant challenges for winter 2023/24 across primary care, hospital services and community services. To respond to these anticipated additional pressures during the winter months, all Trusts have been asked to develop a winter plan which is based around three regionally agreed high impact areas to support people to live well at home and avoid unnecessary attendance at ED or admission. These are:

- Maximising ambulance capacity
- Reducing time spent by patients in emergency departments awaiting clinical decision and next stage of care
- Timely hospital discharge for patients who are medically fit for discharge.

Our winter plan also sets out some of the other actions we are taking to help us manage over the winter months. These include plans to protect planned assessment and treatments, our staff health and wellbeing initiatives, preparation for any surges in respiratory or Covid infections, preparation for industrial action and comprehensive oversight arrangements, both locally and regionally.

A summary of the Western Trust Winter Plan 2023/24 is provided overleaf. This has been shared with you to provide an overview of some of the initiatives which we are putting in place to improve flow through our hospitals and reduce pressure across the system this winter. We will also be highlighting some of the ways you can help us ensure that you receive the best care in the right place to meet your needs.

Our plan will complement and integrate with regional coordination control arrangements to ensure that primary and secondary care and the ambulance service work collectively to smooth service pressures and maintain patient flow and discharge.

Regional Priorities

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Maximise Ambulance Capacity

- Work with NIAS to support ambulance handover, enhanced coordination and smoother patient transfer
- Maximise ambulatory pathways to reduce need for ED attendance and admissions
- More effective use of community services / pathways to maintain people safely at home
- Weekly rapid access frailty clinics at both hospitals.

Reduce Time Spent in ED

- Implement Minor Injuries Unit at Altnagelvin Hospital
- Consolidate acute hospital site coordination hubs to manage patient flow
- Mental Health Liaison team support for patients in ED where required
- Implement agreed ED staffing resilience plan.

Timely Hospital Discharge

- Coordinated approach to patient discharge including best use of discharge lounge
- Enhanced independent sector care home oversight arrangements
- Enhance access to intermediate care beds and EMI placements
- Maximise Domiciliary Care provision
- AHP focus on supporting discharge and hospital flow.

Regional Priorities

Protect Elective Capacity

- Focus on meeting HSC Service Delivery Plan targets and associated recovery plans
- Explore hospital capacity and capability to maintain elective inpatient services
- Build on dedicated elective day care & overnight stay models at Omagh & South West Acute Hospitals
- Maximise theatre capacity
- Maximise available funding for waiting list activity making full use of independent sector providers
- Continued regional clinical prioritisation to ensure equity of access to elective capacity.

Key Enablers

Protect Staff Health & Wellbeing

- Occupational health targeted sickness absence support
- Trust health and well being programmes
- Ongoing senior management visibility
- Timely recruitment to minimise vacancies
- Improve uptake of flu and COVID vaccines.

Surge Preparation

- Implement Trust Surge plans & business continuity arrangements including flexible staff working and Infection Prevention & Control measures
- Implement COVID-19 booster / vaccination programme.

Industrial Action Preparation

- Enhanced command & control arrangements / Industrial Action Working Group in place
- Updated business continuity plans and action cards
- Ongoing engagement with Trades Unions
- Communication with staff, public and key stakeholders.

Monitoring & Reporting

- Enhanced monitoring and oversight at all levels
- Support implementation of escalation process and service continuity plans
- Work with Regional Coordination Centre to minimise disruption to patients.

Maximising Ambulance Capacity

Actions will include:

- Protection of ambulance capacity by maintaining efficient ambulance handover at our Emergency Departments and optimising Hospital Ambulance Liaison Officer support at Altnagelvin.
- Maximising ambulatory capacity through the establishment of a minor injuries unit at Altnagelvin Hospital, extended opening hours of the Altnagelvin ambulatory care unit and the continued operation of our respiratory and cardiology hubs in Altnagelvin, cardiac assessment unit in Omagh, same day emergency care unit in SWAH and paediatric assessment areas in both acute hospitals.
- Effective use of community services and pathways such as Hospital at Home, rapid response nursing services and district nursing. Actions will include a pilot from early November to enable nursing homes to directly refer patients to Hospital at Home services.
- Establishment of rapid access frailty clinics 5 days per week in Derry/Londonderry, Omagh and Enniskillen

Reducing Time Spent in ED awaiting clinical decision and next stage of care

Actions will include:

- Consolidation of acute site co-ordination hubs on both acute hospital sites by December 2023 to effectively manage flow and capacity in the hospitals and community.
- Implementation of a staffing resilience plan agreed for both Emergency Departments to reduce reliance on agency and increase nurse staffing to maintain safe staffing levels in both Emergency Departments.
- Access to timely specialty in-reach to review patients in the Emergency Department and, where appropriate, redirect patients to alternative locations for assessment and treatment, eg ENT rapid access clinic, eye casualty, gynaecology emergency clinic, paediatric assessment unit, respiratory and cardiology hubs, etc.
- Continued timely response by the mental health service to referrals for assessment within 2 hours of patients being declared medically fit.
- Continued implementation of agreed contingency plan arrangements to provide crisis support when patients are delayed awaiting admission to a mental health inpatient facility. The Trust also continues to consider potential solutions for a separate 'safe' space for mental health patients.

Timely Hospital Discharge for Patients who are Medically Fit

Actions will include:

- Enhanced daily management oversight and co-ordination across the Trust to support hospital flow and provide focus on Delayed Transfers of Care across Trust hospitals. This will include ensuring the discharge lounge at Altnagelvin Hospital is effectively utilised and ensuring our AHP workforce focus on supporting hospital flow and timely discharge from hospital.
- Maximising Domiciliary Care through the roll out of the Trust's rota optimisation project in the Waterside locality by November 2023 to facilitate more hospital discharges and reduce unmet need within this locality; implementation of the Early Review Team from late October 2023 to review care packages 6-8 weeks following discharge from hospital and free up care hours where appropriate; management of all clients with a care package greater than 28 hours through the Enhanced Care Panel to ensure enhanced care requirement is reviewed within agreed timeframes and reduced where appropriate.
- Maximising Community Capacity by reconfiguring residential home beds to provide intermediate care beds, repurposing beds in Waterside Hospital to increase transitional care provision and increasing intermediate and EMI capacity in two Trust residential facilities and one nursing home.

Challenges

It is important to highlight the ongoing pressures, in which the Western Trust, and our partners, are already operating, as we now prepare for a period of additional challenges:

Workforce – Typically winter sees an increase in staff sickness, which combined with high vacancy levels may put us under increased pressure. We will be doing our best to maintain safe staffing levels across all areas where the demand is increased in order to provide care to all of our patients and service users. We will be continuing to deliver a range of health and wellbeing initiatives to support our staff and we will be encouraging all of our staff to get vaccinated against Covid-19 and flu.

Industrial Action - The ongoing industrial action will undoubtedly add to the pressures within our Health and Social Care services as these arise over the winter period, and will impact our ability to deliver patient care in the way we would wish to.

Unscheduled Care – Our emergency departments have been faced with increasing pressure in recent years with long waits for assessment or admission a regular occurrence. We are implementing a range of actions to manage this over the winter, including increased staffing in our emergency departments and the establishment of a minor injuries unit in Altnagelvin Hospital. However, across our hospital sites, we are facing challenges with limited bed spaces as a result of increased numbers of patients who present with more complex challenges. Therefore, timely discharge of patients once medically fit, remains key to ensuring all patients can be accommodated when admission is required. We have developed plans to make best use of

domiciliary care capacity and have reconfigured community beds to best meet patient needs. Despite these best efforts, there will be times when patients have to wait in the Emergency Department whilst waiting for a bed to become available in a ward.

Delivery of Planned Care – During the winter months, we may find it difficult to provide all of our planned services while also managing the expected increased demand for urgent and emergency services. Our plan includes steps we will take to minimise any impact as much as possible, including continuing to take forward elective day case and overnight stay developments in Omagh and South West Acute Hospital. However, patient safety will always be our priority whilst we balance these risks.

Financial Constraints – The enormous financial pressures facing the Health Service across Northern Ireland are already well documented, and are not expected to change this winter. With limited funding and significant existing pressures, we will continue to identify any emerging financial pressures during this winter period and use established channels and processes with the Department of Health to secure additional resources as required.

‘Outbreaks’ of Covid-19 and Flu in both hospitals and care homes – A range of preventative measures including community vaccination and personal protection measures continue to be implemented. Outbreaks are likely to impact on the services we can provide over winter, including the need for additional bed closures in hospital and community facilities.

Communication Plan

The Western Trust has developed a communications plan which will include publicity campaigns through a range of media to keep the public updated and informed throughout the winter period.

Conclusion

The Western Trust will continue to work regionally and with all our partners to ensure our services remain safe for patients and clients. However, we recognise that this will be an extremely challenging winter at the end of a difficult year. We will also continue to highlight where the Western Trust has specific service and patient access concerns and will continue to work to minimise the impact of these on our patients and staff.

What can you do to help over winter?

If you become ill or injured and need medical help or advice, choose well by using the right health service for your needs.

Play your part help our Health and Care Service

Please choose the service most appropriate for your symptoms

-  **Selfcare** - to treat an ache, pain, upset stomach, cough or cold, get plenty of rest, take simple pain killers if needed and use over-the-counter medicines.
-  **Your local pharmacist** - they are there to give confidential, expert advice and can treat a number of minor ailments such as aches and pains, skin conditions, allergies, eye conditions or upset stomach and emergency contraception.
-  **Your GP** - they will give expert medical advice and diagnosis, referring you for further care or consultation as needed.
-  **Primary Eyecare Assessment & Referral Service** - treats sudden eye conditions such as red eyes, sudden reduction in vision, eye pain or a foreign body in the eye.
Go to: <https://online.hscni.net/our-work/ophthalmic-services/eyes/>
-  **Mental Healthcare** - if you experiencing mental health difficulties there are a range of services available to help you.
Go to: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/mental-health-support>
-  **Emergency Dental Treatment** - if patients have an urgent dental need then they can follow the advice on the HSC website.
<https://online.hscni.net/our-work/dental-services/out-of-hours-emergency-dental-treatment/>
-  **Minor Injuries Unit** - treats injuries that are not life threatening such as broken bones, sprains, bites and burns.
-  **Urgent Care Centres**- treats injuries that are not life threatening such as broken bones, sprains, minor scalp wounds and suturing of minor wounds.
-  **Emergency Department** - provides the highest level of emergency care for patients, especially those with acute illnesses or trauma, such as heart attacks, stroke, serious accidents or head injuries.
Call 999 when there is a risk to life or serious injury.



Your support is vital at this critical time.

Choosing well ensures you receive the right care at the right time and that emergency medical care is available to those people who need it the most.

Take some time to find out more about the variety of healthcare services that are available.

Visit [How to use your health services | nidirect](#) to find out more.